

# MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



Report #56, July-August 1984

## Friendship and Community

This issue of the Report explores the idea of friendship and community, that is, how do we experience friendship? What ways do we use to reach out to others for friendship and to share community? This is not to in any way diminish the significance of our families, but simply to recognize that our need for intimacy and caring relationships with other people cannot be met by family members alone. I wrote to a number of friends and posed several questions to get them started thinking on the subject. As I began thinking about the topic, I realized there are many concepts that are closely related and an integral part of the subject: Ideas such as how we view ourselves in relationship to others; our own "world view;" the whole area of communication, listening skills and relating to members of the complementary sex are all involved in our efforts to reach out and make friends.

Probably most of us enjoy friendships, but the difficulty comes in finding ways to make time for friendships, especially those of us who have fulltime employment. Another problem area is finding ways to try to maintain contact with friends after we move away.

While this is not a controversial topic, I hope this issue can be thought-provoking and stimulating.—  
*Joyce R. Eby*

*Joyce R. Eby is a high school mathematics teacher and currently works as administrative assistant in the Personnel Office at Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, Va. She is a member of the Committee on Women's Concerns.*

## Married, With Many Friends.....

For me, the accumulated trust of 27 years of marriage is a significant part of the freedom I feel and the priority I give to the cultivation of friendships. On the other hand, many important friendships through the years have contributed to the growth and nurturing of my own person and our marriage.

Throughout our marriage, we have considered friendships an important priority in our "spare time" allocation. In the last 10 years we have been more intentional about cultivating friendships as individuals, realizing in a new way that our marriage is better if we do not demand of it that we try to meet all of each other's needs for interpersonal relationships.

While I could elaborate my growing appreciation for the women who are my supporting, prodding friends, I have agreed to focus here on the place that friendships with men have in my life. My friendships with men grow from (or within) two primary foci of activity in my life, work and church. I am especially grateful to be part of a congregation that recognizes the importance of cultivating relationships across lines of age, marital status, and sex. I feel accepted for who I am, which includes—but is not defined by—my marital status. Our congregational commitment statement includes the determination to "give ourselves to each other in genuine concern

and relationships that call for much informal conversation and prayer whenever time and circumstances permit." I rather like our older (pre-caffeine sensitivity) version, which called for the conversation and prayers "two by two, at lunch, over coffee, on the phone..." I am glad that I feel as free to meet with a male member of the congregation as with a female.

Friendships with men at work? Here I experience respect and freedom to consult on any work-related issues, but the conventional boundaries limiting male-female friendships remain strong. Part of this is my own choosing—I live in another town, and like the distance of separating weekends, church and social life from work. But I do consider my friendships with women who work at the same place essential to my life and well-being there. Interestingly, in our snack shop lunch hours, the division of status—faculty or support staff—supercedes that of sex. Faculty men and women gather with their brown bags or hamburgers; female secretaries gather at other tables; and I can't report where the male maintenance staff eats!

In the June 1984 special issue of *Esquire*, "A Celebration of the New American Woman," the editor comments at some length on a question not spoken to directly in the issue, that of friendships between men

and women. He talks about the risks, the benefits, and the necessity of such friendships. He concludes, "If we are to live broader lives, being closed off to half of the population is ridiculous. This issue is dedicated to the idea of male-female friendship, and the support, caring, insight and learning it can bring"

I recognize that my attitude toward male-female friendships has changed considerably in the past 25 years. While this is in large part due to societal changes,

it is also closely related to the security I feel in my marriage. The years have fine-tuned my internal intimacy/dependency barometer; I trust that barometer's signals. I value the friendships with men that enrich my life, and I respect and value my husband's friendships with women.—*Alice M. Roth*

*Alice Roth, Elkhart, Indiana, is Director of Admissions at Goshen College.*

## Reach Out and be a Friend

You've just moved to a new community, and you'd like to make friends. How do you begin?

Moving to a new community is something I find difficult. I know many others, too, who have similar feelings. Young people begin college—and have to make new friends. Sometimes changing employment leaves one with the same task.

The old saying goes: to have a friend, you must *be* one. So here are a few suggestions toward establishing satisfying friendships. Be positive about yourself. You have something to offer others—like wanting to *be* a friend. Some have a habit of thinking about what they *can't* do or what they *don't* have, and so in thinking negatively, they focus on themselves.

Sometimes in making friendships you'll have to take the initiative in getting acquainted with persons. Give yourself an assignment to *begin* a certain number of conversations. There must be something to ask your new neighbor about, or an observation you can make to the person next to you. Some friendships begin with "small talk" in the grocery store or an elevator or while riding the bus.

If you want to make friends, you'll also need to be accessible. You can't make friends when you withdraw from persons. Join some community service organizations, go to church and meet people, share your hobby. Be ready to listen, too. You may initiate the conversation, but be prepared to listen to the response. There are subtle ways of letting someone know you are listening—by your facial expressions or nodding once in awhile.

Another suggestion is to let people know you. Not everyone will share your interests or your ideas, but a friendship won't really blossom unless you let people know you.

One friendship I now treasure began when someone asked, "How are you?" I was having a problem at the time and I risked telling him about it. I don't recommend telling a life history to every chance acquaintance, or even a problem when someone says, "How are you?" But sometimes it is important to be honest, not pretending sophistication or hiding behind a smiling mask.

It isn't easy for some to reach out to make new friends; taking one step at a time seems slow, but it's important to *take* a step, and often, the first one is the hardest.

## Friendship is Giving and Receiving

I like this description of friends: "Friends should share your life experiences, giving you a sounding board for testing your thoughts and ideas, encourage you toward fulfilling your goals and dreams, help you release your stress and tension, comfort you, support you, understand you, and do much toward giving you your self worth."

That's a big order. Maybe that's why we need more than one friend!

Friendship is both giving and receiving. We're not to be like a child, who carefully keeps track of "whose turn it is to be first in line." Friendship gives without keeping records; often the gifts we receive from a friend are those qualities which we could never repay and gifts which cannot be bought.

I think that one must *learn* to be a friend. Some learn while they are children, others grow to adulthood and aren't quite sure about how to *give or receive* friendship.

One young girl who learned early the true meaning of friendship came home from her playmate's house much later than she was supposed to. Her mother was angrily waiting: "Where have you been?"

"I was at Sally's house. She broke her doll!"

"Well, what does that have to do with your being late? You certainly couldn't fix it!"

"But, Mother, I had to stay and help her cry!"

Sometimes we need to stay and help cry; sometimes we need to stay and help laugh or sit quietly. We need to become sensitive to feelings, ready to share.

Reaching out in friendship is an exercise. Like most exercises, it makes one stronger with each step.—*Margaret Foth*

*Margaret Foth, Harrisonburg, Virginia, is the speaker on "Your Time," a daily radio broadcast sponsored by the Mennonite churches.*



## Friendship Through Correspondence

As Mennonites we have a good sense of community and see the value of making sure everyone has a feeling of belonging, especially in the local church situation. But I certainly feel this could be developed and expanded to include the local people who need to leave the home community for the broader areas of work and service. Therefore I am suggesting that there are ways in which the old art of letter writing can become a means of developing community and closeness even though physically quite distant.

During the past years I have written many letters, often thinking them quite simple and ordinary. But having lived in France now for almost three years I have become increasingly aware of this value of friendship. Just recently I have received several letters which have proven to me that being physically away does not mean I am forgotten.

There are many women (and men) scattered throughout the world, often living in difficult and lonely places, sometimes dangerous, often isolated and out of touch with home and church family. Living in a different culture and hearing a strange language is not easy until this strange language and culture become familiar. Then the casual acquaintance can develop into an in-depth friendship.

The "we're thinking about you and praying for you" letter does wonders in relieving discouragement and has a way of putting new determination and lightness in the day's work.

It takes time and effort for this kind of community but the excuses of "I'm not a good letter writer" or "I don't have anything interesting to write" can very quickly dampen friendship.

Seasonal cards with verses and church bulletins are much appreciated even though the weight may mean an extra stamp to send it. I have many of these posted in my kitchen and as I see them I am reminded of the person who sent it and so can develop a sense of community which reaches across the ocean. I must pay tribute to our family and several friends who haven't forgotten that I like pretty cards and are willing to pay the extra stamp to send it.

One day I received a paraphrased scripture portion written just for me by some friends from my home church. This is one of the letters that I will cherish (and keep) for many years as a memory of a special kind of community and caring. It gave me that extra strength for the day and I go back to it again and again.

One of the most meaningful friendships I have is with a non-Mennonite woman that I have never seen. I know her only through her letters, yet she is a special caring, loving friend interested in every part of my life. She tells me about her family, her plans for a Sunday school class, her classes in a community college, her Anabaptist beliefs, her peace convictions, or her discovery of a new book. I communicate to her our present frustrations or recent new discoveries. I suggest books which

might interest her, talk about many changes in our family. I value her friendship which continues through our regular correspondence. She is a most caring, loving Christian friend and I thank God for her friendship which began because I answered her request to become friends with a Mennonite woman. Had I ignored this request I certainly would have missed many blessings and lost an opportunity to stretch my friendship to include this loving person.

Letter writing has almost become a lost art. I challenge you to rediscover the beauty and richness of friendship through correspondence and so make it possible for "community" to reach around the world.—*Jean M. Kraybill*

*Jean Kraybill has worked as an administrative assistant the past three years in the office of Mennonite World Conference, Strasbourg, France.*

---

## VISITING: A Gift of Love

*By Helen Good Brenneman*

Having been a multiple sclerosis patient in Greencroft Nursing Center in Goshen, Ind. for nine years, I have received a great deal of love and caring.

Part of this has come from friends who have visited regularly, reading to me, praying with me and just lifting my morale with a good chat. I think of someone who recently shared a good joke, one which brought chuckles for weeks and was worth passing on to friends.

One friend has brought in scalloped oyster dinners—a real treat. Another packs my suitcase for trips, or shops for me.

As a resident who can get around in a wheelchair, I try to pass on love to others. I read to patients from my large-print Testament and devotional book, visit shut-ins, and lead a weekly prayer group.

I have made a few observations about visiting the sick during the time of my illness. I have noticed there are times when a visit is not welcomed or appropriate.

When a patient is sleeping, sitting on a commode, entertaining a spouse or children, or feeling ill, it often is better to postpone the visit.

On the other hand, one oft-sleeping patient would like for her friends to awaken her and talk for awhile; however, this should be checked out with a nurse. Some things have to be played by ear.

While meditating on this article, calls came to visit with three patients. Georgia, with terminal cancer, wanted to tell me about the thrill of finding her missing brother. Maude, a newcomer to Greencroft, was eager to share her adjustments in entering the nursing center. Mary, who was finishing her supper, wanted to tell me about selling her possessions, her failing health and her belief in prayer.

I had to think of Abe Schmitt's book *Listening With Love* (Herald Press, Scottdale, Pa.), and was reminded that Job's miserable comforters didn't get into trouble while they listened. It was when they opened their mouths to give advice that their "comfort" turned to misery.

I think of other loving acts over the years. In my room is a beautiful potted plant—the gift of a thoughtful cousin. And I will never forget the corsage which came from a friend when my son was married in a distant state. Tagged "To the Mother of the Groom," it cheered my life for days.

Visit the sick and the afflicted. Share your wit and the warmth of your love. Sit where they sit and share the monotony or frustrations of their days.

And "as you have done it to the least of these, my brethren (and sisters), you have done it unto the One who inspires all deeds of love."—*Reprinted by permission from SHARING magazine, Winter 1984.*

---

## Reflections on Friendship

The other evening as I began preparing supper, I went to my file box of recipes and thought of an old friend. This collection of recipes, often in the friend's handwriting, goes back 20 years and represents the six communities in which we've lived. I even sorted out our favorite recipes and took them along to Africa.

Friendships are not only pleasant, but necessary for survival. Persons who suffered through life in the German concentration camps were much more likely to survive if they had even one close friend than those who built walls around themselves, shutting everyone else out.

Some of the characteristics of friends are a sense of sharing openly with one another, a sense of acceptance, a sense of reciprocity, of sharing past events, and of accountability to each other. Healthy friendship allows for disagreement.

There is something in us that craves a connectedness with our past. This summer I will attend my 25th high school class reunion. I look forward to meeting old friends again—some whom I haven't seen for 25 years. Already I know that my life has been very different from many of the women in my class, but I hope to be able to "connect" with them because of the bond we shared 25 years ago.

Since we have become much busier and more organized than in the past, we have found ways to promote friendship. Some of these ways are by providing host families at church to invite guests for dinner, "Mothers and Others" programs on weekday mornings, professional associations, thrift shops, working together in MCC relief sales, "moving" committees to organize persons to help families move their household goods, the Mennonite-Your-Way Directory and the MCC Visitor Exchange Program, to name a few. One excellent program in eastern Pennsylvania sponsored by the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions arranges for international students to stay in Mennonite homes

during the school holidays. Of course this benefits both the host families and the students.

When one lives in another culture, it takes a real effort to make friends where language and customs form barriers. And even though one tries to live much more simply than at home, the economic differences between the western world and a third world country make the gap even wider. The temptation can be to form close friendships with other missionaries or development workers who have similar backgrounds rather than to make the effort to really learn to know the local people.

One of the beauties of African culture is the way people are recognized by greeting each other before beginning to talk business. When we came home I really noticed the way we Americans cut short or omit entirely this way of recognizing another's personhood.

Since I work full time, I have to find ways to promote friendship. One of these is by taking part in a "Tuesday morning walking group." About six to eight women in our neighborhood get up at 5:30 a.m. on Tuesdays to walk briskly to a restaurant for breakfast, discussing whatever is on our minds, and walk back in time to be at work by 8:00. We have all found this to be a rewarding experience.

Many of the church colleges have women's organizations which meet because of a common interest. Here at EMC I am also part of a group which meets once a month to discuss a chosen book. Leadership is passed around. This is one way of my making sure I read twelve books a year and have the stimulation of discussing them with other people.

Early in my adult life I decided I wanted to be as helpful to other people as I can be. I found this attitude to be an important stance when we served as country representatives with MCC in Botswana. There were times when we needed to ask others for help, too. One time when our daughter Carol got sick in Lesotho (400 miles from home), we had to have a place to stay while she recovered from surgery in the hospital. Friends of friends took us in for several weeks until she was well enough to travel home. That was really a welcome gift.

Norman Cousins has written, "...Lasting friendships are a rare reward, one of the prime gifts that life has to offer." Jesus said, "Love each other as I have loved you."—*Joyce R. Eby*



Photo credit: Marvin Frey

## Sharing Friendship at Akron

We, as many fellow MCCers, left our home community to come to Akron. Because there are singles and families who have no near supporting relatives, friends fill the role of the much needed and sought for kin. Phone calls, child care, shared meals and "coffees" help create close and lasting friendships while husbands (and fathers) are gone. There are many lonely times during these absences. The most difficult times were when the children were small. Invariably, their illnesses would come when Daddy was away. Once, the day after his leaving, the first one came down with chicken pox. The other two got them after the required time lapse and were in the scab stage when he came back. Plumbing has a way of breaking down and cars develop suspicious or downright problematic symptoms at these times. The days are busy but the evenings and weekends are lonely.

An informal monthly "MCC Women's Meeting" is an anticipated event for fellowship. Signing up hostesses for the next meeting is the only item of business. If the hostesses are aware of "input" such as a person with a craft to demonstrate or slides to show, they arrange for it. Otherwise, handwork and chatting become an enjoyable time of fellowship. The hostesses arrange a time

and place for meeting and provide simple refreshments. In fact, Edgar says there is so much fun, we don't even miss our husbands!

People entering and returning from assignments abroad add enrichment to the environment. We often invite these people over for a meal and fellowship, building friendships with people from many different countries. This sharing and understanding has led to a global perspective which encourages us to live resourcefully. Gardening, canning, freezing and sewing gain in importance with this wider global viewpoint.

Because I need to socialize more when I'm alone, I have more friends of my own than we have "couple" friends. Edgar, tired of being with people during long trips, needs time alone to catch up with himself and his office work.

My closest friends are Mennonite and mostly from our church and/or MCC. The joyous occasion of the birth of our first grandchild was celebrated at both these places. Support and friendship continue as we endeavor new experiences in each new era of our lives.—*Gladys Stoesz*

*Gladys Stoesz, Akron, Pa., is a homemaker and librarian at MCC headquarters.*

---

## Experiencing Friendships

A saying I have on a plate hanging on my wall says, "True friends are like diamonds, precious but rare. False friends are like autumn leaves found everywhere."

Just being one's self—a smile, a friendly hello in passing says so much. A smile is worth a million dollars. I've been told many times, "You always have a smile." Why not? Life is worth living. Christ gave me so much to live for—each new day is a gift from God.

I like people and making new friends makes my day.

Coming to Eastern Mennonite College as campus hostess and managing the guest house was a lot of fun. To make it feel like home away from home and making guests feel at ease and comfortable gave me a feeling of well being, whatever, wherever the circumstances were.

Building good relationships and friendships takes lots of loving and caring, being never too busy to give a helping hand. I guess I find it easier to be on the giving end rather than the receiving end. But I have learned and am working at accepting help from others graciously.

Never take a blessing from someone else by saying "Oh! You shouldn't have." I think as Mennonites we have a lot to learn here. Persons of other cultures reach out with a handshake, a friendly smile, a cup of tea or coffee. That says a lot—"I care."

Friendships with the opposite sex don't threaten me. At one point in my life it may have. But getting out and

working among both sexes has helped me mature here a lot. And I'm very secure in my marriage and my relationship with my husband. Life is what we make it, and I like a broad, not a narrow world of friends. They have so much to give me.

I don't think I have any special bond with Mennonite women over women of another faith. In fact, some of my closest friends are from other walks of life and faiths. Many of these were lonely women who moved into our area from another part of the country. Making them feel a part of the community is a challenge to me; it gives me a real lift. Several of these women I led to a deeper relationship with God. These friends have become like sisters and we've often shared our concerns and sometimes our weaknesses. These kinds of relationships are precious and really important to me. They help to make a complete and balanced Christian life.

Friends and friendships are a gift to be cherished. Never abuse them.

To make someone's day brighter and their load lighter—that's my goal in life. God gave us friends that we here on earth might have a glimpse of the joy of heaven.—*Vera Kuhns*

*After rearing their family, Vera and her husband moved to Harrisonburg, Va., where she worked as campus hostess for three years of voluntary service. She still provides teas for special occasions and is a member of the Auxiliary.*

## Friendship and Community

Friendship, I feel, is a vital ingredient in everyone's life for health and well being. The woman next door felt the same. Our sharing grew into a neighborhood Bible study where persons met together for fellowship and prayer. Some met Christ for the first time, others in a new way, but all of us were strengthened to cope with life as we found it in our various homes, community relationships and denominations.

These friends still call long distance and stop to visit when they get in the area or plan special trips to see us.

From the time our youngest child was two years old we opened our home to those who needed a place to stay while working or studying in the area or to find refuge from drugs or problematic family situations.

More recently, when our youngest left for college our extra bedrooms have accommodated students from the local college, university and seminary, as well as scholars in residence and persons needing a half-way house to adjust to society after being institutionalized.

Another source of friendship over the years has been our children's friends. We tried to have our house nice

enough to make everyone feel comfortable and welcome but not so spotless that persons have to fear every move lest they spoil something. A tingle still goes up my spine when I recall the day when Jeannie came back to visit after many years and shared her pilgrimage since leaving the community. Hers was a lonely journey in search of friendship in the city, on the streets, in bars, anywhere and everywhere—until she met Christ and made Him her best friend.

Small group participation has been a real help in recent years. It's a good feeling to know I have friends I can call in the middle of the night if I need them, and also to be that kind of friend. We have enlarged our circle of friends and strengthened ties by frequently sharing a simple meal or snack together in our home or in the park.

Each person brings something unique to our family and we have been blessed.—*Betty Drescher*

*Betty Drescher is a homemaker and serves the Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Virginia, along with her pastor-husband.*

---

## Thoughts on Friendship

I've experienced friendship in a variety of ways in different contexts: church, work, family and community.

In my local congregation, friendship has been conveyed by:

- persons who have said, "Come, feel a part of our group. We're glad you're here."
- my being asked to participate in varied aspects of congregational life
- being invited to members' homes and other activities
- experiencing worship together
- persons offering to help with major household tasks and emergencies
- meeting in a small group for sharing and Bible study.

In my work, I've experienced friendship in:

- special events
- receiving invitations to travel to home areas of fellow workers and to meet their families
- regular "check-ins" on a one-to-one basis with co-workers
- a journaling/sharing group that includes listening as well as talking
- receiving help from co-workers in moving and settling into the community.

Neighbors have extended friendship through:

- "welcome" meals
- sharing roses from their flower gardens and other gifts of kindness
- organizing community gatherings.

Maintaining and renewing childhood friendships keeps me in touch with my home community and family. It's good to hear comments like:

- "Glad you're home. You're still important; we don't forget."
- "We accept you even as you change."

Friendship must be offered as well as received. Some ways I have reached out to others are by:

- accepting congregational assignments
- identifying persons in church with similar interests and inviting them to share special activities
- broadening my circle of close associates by choosing to work outside the home
- inviting colleagues to "have breakfast" on a one-to-one basis
- accepting invitations to join groups and by sticking with commitments
- accepting extracurricular assignments at work
- expressing interest in co-workers' lives outside the office
- initiating deeper sharing with a few individuals
- entertaining in my home on special occasions and with regular groupings of friends
- inviting neighbors for holiday celebrations
- initiating and reciprocating meal invitations
- maintaining family contact via letters and phone calls
- following the tradition of sending Christmas cards to keep in touch with persons far and wide
- making a point to "check in" with persons when they are in the area.



I bring these gifts to my friendships:

- appreciation for the surroundings: urban, rural, mountains or sea
- spontaneity; pointing beyond the everyday; encouraging others to celebrate the ordinary things
- a listening ear; sometimes offering counsel or reflections to help defuse a situation
- being a catalyst to experience new things
- a certain amount of spiritual perception
- an ability to make persons feel comfortable.

I don't often confront friends about weaknesses in their lives. I feel comfortable confronting others only in certain situations, such as my journaling group or with long-standing friends, and usually when I've been asked to evaluate.

Living away from family for most of my adult life has meant that I've needed to seek friends beyond the

family bond. Now, most of my close friends are other than family. Family relationships are mostly on a casual "good friend" level.

Most of my friends were found at my own initiative, apart from my husband. We have no children and the fact that my husband travels a lot for his job contributes to this. We do have good mutual friends, but my closest friends are individually sought-out ones. My spouse has the same freedom as I do to choose his friends. This can be threatening, however, when a chosen friend (male or female) of my spouse doesn't "click" with my personality. These situations take some talking.—Becky Miller

Rebecca E. Miller works part-time as a secretary in the Records Office at Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, VA.

---

## For Further Reading

- Callenbach, E. and Leufeldt, C., "The Art of Friendship," *Family Health*, October, 1980, p. 54-6.
- Cousins, Norman, "Celebrating Friendship," *Saturday Review*, October, 1981, p. 6 ff.
- Dundon, S., "How to Have a Friend of the Opposite Sex," *Redbook*, October, 1982, pp. 114-15.
- "Balancing Friendship and Marriage," *Parents*, September, 1979, p. 18.
- "Friendship: An Inquiry," *Psychology Today*, March, 1979, p. 64-66.
- Hamon, S.A., "Closer than a Brother," *Christianity Today*, January 1, 1982, p. 30-31.
- Horn, J.C., "In Cities, Fast Friends Come Slowly," (study of graduate students in urban and country colleges, by Karen Franck), *Psychology Today*, April, 1981, p. 32 ff.
- Jacoby, S. "Keeping Friends," *McCalls*, March, 1981, p. 68 ff.
- Lasswell, M. and Lobsenz, N., "Can Men and Women Be Just Friends?" *McCalls*, March, 1980, p. 89-90.

- Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1960.
- Lindsey, K., "Rx for Depression: One Friend Every Four Hours," *Ms.*, June, 1979, p. 57-9.
- Marty, Martin E., "Friendship Tested," *Christian Century*, December 24, 1980, p. 1266-72.
- Miller, Paul M., *Peer Counseling in the Church*, Herald Press, 1978.
- Schmitt, Abraham, *The Art of Listening with Love*, Herald Press, 1977.
- Simmons, I.B., "Working at Office Friendships," *Mademoiselle*, August, 1981, 188-9.
- Stern, B.L., "The Art of Caring: Why Women Need—and Are—Such Good Friends," *Vogue*, September, 1982, p. 274.
- "The Good a Good Friend Can Do," *Changing Times*, April, 1981, p. 62-4.
- "Women's Friendships," *Redbook*, July, 1979, p. 31 ff.

---

## Mutuality and Creativity— In the Image of God

From Canada, the West Coast, the rolling plains states, along the eastern seaboard and from Harrisonburg itself, 200 registrants came to Harrisonburg, Virginia, May 3-6, to hear Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, to fellowship with old friends, and to make new ones. The theme for the seventh Women in Ministry Conference, "In the Image of God," sparked poetic, dramatic and artistic creativity in both leaders and participants. It was good to have been there.

Just inside the Harrisonburg Mennonite Church foyer lay a rich variety of creations ranging from innovative sculptures, paintings and photographs to a lacquered loaf of homemade bread. The ultimate creative expression posed imaginatively a few paces beyond, in the front of the sanctuary. Fashioned by Barb Fast and Juliet Wiebe of Harrisonburg, the white foam

core and plaster of paris sculpture symbolized three women in creative positions flanked by two lacey trees.

Keynote speaker for the conference, Virginia Mollenkott, professor of English at William Patterson College in New Jersey, presented sound and fresh exegesis of scriptures in her three addresses. She won the respect of theologian, scholar and layperson alike for her facility in both theology and language.

What gave Virginia such credibility was her biblically sound basis for urging mutuality between male and female. As a Christian feminist, she emphasized she is in no way advocating female supremacy. Rather she supports "balanced harmony and mutuality between the sexes."

During her first address, "The Image of God," Mollenkott explored the uses of female imagery in biblical material. She referred to the father in the Luke 15 story of the Prodigal Son to illustrate that "power can and should be nurturant and loving [female attributes]." Later she asserted that "the only Christ-like use of power is to empower those who have none."

Mollenkott emphasized that classism, sexism, militarism and racism in society today result from our inability to use power properly. In the first and subsequent sessions, she emphatically preached that these "isms" clash with the biblical injunctions to do justice. "When one party (male) dominates the other (female), we are moving toward militarism which is the opposite of what Jesus taught."

For her second address, "Humanity in the Image of God," Mollenkott proposed that "man and woman is created in the noble and powerful image of God to be co-creator of a just and loving society." Building on her first presentation, she suggested that "in one sense each of us is called to become a mother of new humanity (the private work) and in another we must be midwives doing the structural work on dehumanizing structures" around us. "True justice would equal the rules we would make if we didn't know where we were going to turn up in society—what race, sex, economic status and so forth," she asserted.

Session three with Virginia Mollenkott became the most emotionally intense. Her forceful, propelling delivery swept the audience to their outer limits as she dared to speak to lively ethical and moral issues. Once again she spoke of the proper use of power which is "to give it to those who have none." "Those" are the outcasts and rejects of society—in relationships not sanctioned by society in general or the church in particular. Such an intense and compact message defies summarization!

Among the most poignant statements she made are the following. About ministry, "We have it if we want it." "The more we share God's love and forgiveness, the more we will experience it." She encouraged us to ask ourselves this question when looking at a questionable

relationship: "Does this relationship engender God's love, empower the other to minister?" Her final position toward persons (in questionable relationships) is to accept them in "loving mutuality." If we are unwilling to do that, we will lose them from the body of believers.

In addition to the keynote addresses of Virginia Mollenkott, Mennonite women and men used drama, poetry, nature and imagery to create meaningful worship services which nurtured the spirit of all participants at the conference. Especially significant were the passing of single flowers from hand to hand in Friday worship and the celebration of the eucharist in the form of fruit, herbal tea and bread in the final gathering—Sunday morning worship. The leader of the final worship service opened with these words: "We can never meet again like this; that makes this moment sacred." Indeed the entire conference was sacred, meeting as we did to encourage and build each other up.

Workshops met during the two full days of the conference. Representative options were: The Intensive Journal—A Tool for Growth; Church as Changing Environment for Women and Men; Dealing with Conflict; and Pathfinding in Midlife. These and fifteen other one-and-one-half hour workshops provided for the kind of sacred moments referred to in the final worship service. Additional options scheduled during free time were the film on women in advertising, "Killing Us Softly" and a United Methodist documentary, "A Lost History."

Creative planning and sound spirituality were exercised by the steering committee chaired by Pamela Beverage and Margaret Foth (both highly articulate conference moderators as well), Margaret Alger, Ken Handrich, Dorothy Y. Shank, Arlene Stauffer, Barbara Stoltzfus, Twila Stoltzfus and Ann Yoder.

For weeks after the conference, it continued to impact the participants. Virginia Mollenkott's presentations evoked lively discussion and healthy controversy. She embodies the love of Christ for the outcasts and rejects in twentieth century society. We needed to hear her. It was good to have been there.—*Shirley Kohler Yoder, Harrisonburg, VA*



*Virginia Ramey Mollenkott addresses Women in Ministry conference. Photo credit: Michael Hostetler*



## Women in Lancaster Conference: Survey Results

A total of 1,045 people participated in a survey of the beliefs and practices of members of Lancaster Conference on the subject of women in the church and family. Responses came from 120 congregations. The response rate of those participating soared to a spectacular 78 percent.

As their occupations, ages and addresses varied, so did their responses. For example, to the question, should women be ordained, some said that it would be a mistake, others, that it would be wrong not to. To the issue of theological influences, some replied that this conference was influenced too much by fundamentalism, about an equal number, that fundamentalism has exerted too little influence. Concerning mutuality, some said submission of women to men is the Christian order, others, that mutuality is the main theme of New Testament teaching.

"We expected a wide range of beliefs and practice," said Connie Stauffer, a member of the Task Force on Women in Church and Family, "and we got it."

However, in spite of the wide spectrum of responses, it is possible to draw from the data several broad conclusions which approximate the beliefs of the majority: mutuality is the standard for the home, women's gifts should be used in the church, commissioning women as deaconesses should at least be considered, ordaining women as ministers is not desired.

"But the majority is not a verdict," said David Thomas, bishop, former moderator of the conference, and a member of the Task Force which did the survey. "In fact, I think the survey is an invitation to honest, tolerant discussion."

Some of the patterns of responses to the questionnaire were predictable, and others were surprising.

"What amazes me," said Leon Stauffer, Executive Secretary of the Board of Congregational Resources, "is that the men's and women's views were identical on practically everything from employed mothers to ordination." Marital status did not make much difference either.

"I was not surprised," he said, "that education and age were factors making a difference."

Marian Leaman, staff for the Family Life Commission which spawned the Task Force, said, "the 66 percent of those who said change on women's issues is going the right speed really interests me."

"On that 66 percent," said David, "I can get several good nights of sleep." The other members of the Task Force, besides David and Connie, are Miriam Housman, Chester Kurtz, Dorcas Lehman and Ann Ranck.

The Task Force was appointed in 1982 by the Family Life Commission (FLC), a commission of the Board of Congregational Resources of Lancaster Conference, to bring together representative voices to find ways to

enable congregations to address issues related to women. The idea was generated by several women who raised concerns about the role of women in congregations and families.

During its first year the Task Force decided to study the current practices and beliefs of Lancaster Conference members to encourage discussion and to provide data.

In September 1983 the FLC accepted the Report of the Task Force, recommended it for review by the Leadership Council, the Bishop Board, and WMSC, and extended the life of the Task Force for another year to monitor and interpret the findings of the survey.

In the survey a range of ages and opinions was requested. Although such selection is not random and can be influenced by the preferences of the distributors, the results are an accurate reflection of the attitudes of those who completed the questionnaires.

"Since the sample was not taken randomly we cannot assume that the results are representative of Lancaster Conference as a whole," said Don Kraybill, a sociologist who gave technical assistance to the Task Force, "but by the same token it is very useful and it is a true picture of the way 1,045 people act and believe." The high percentage of returns and the large number of responses to the optional questions lead the Task Force to conclude that there is strong interest in the issues of women in family and church.

Here is a composite portrait of the most typical respondent: she is married, about 39 years old, and has a high school education. She goes to a rural congregation in Lancaster County numbering 165 members where she sometimes teaches Sunday School. She and her husband have three children, each of whom she nursed about six months.

She and her husband share responsibility for the discipline of the children, major financial decisions and the family devotions. They tend, though, to interpret the New Testament as teaching the "headship of man" in regard to certain areas. Before the children went to school she was not employed outside the home for more than one-quarter time.

While she is somewhat in favor of commissioning women as deaconesses or lay leaders, she does not believe women should be ordained. However, she is happy with the steps being taken to involve women in the church, and she is absolutely certain that women should be involved deeply in the church.

The data from the survey shows that women frequently participate in the public life of this conference. Some of the offices held and duties performed by women in about two out of three congregations are: lead children's meetings in public worship, lead children's meetings or children's church, secretary of congregational meeting, speaker on assigned topic, committee member for nursery or children's church, song leader.

Other positions and roles assumed sometimes by women in a few congregations are: council member, secretary of church or S.S., teacher of mixed adult class, speak from pulpit, treasurer of church or S.S., S.B.S. superintendent, S.S. superintendent, chair of congregational meeting.

The degree to which women participate in public affairs and the degree to which men participate in family life fluctuate from generation to generation.

While gender and marital status were not variables in the responses, age and education clearly were. For example, while the average percentage expressing agreement with women serving on the Mission Board and similar positions was 58, by age groups it varied from almost one-third to three-quarters: over 65, 32% agree; 15-20, 73%.

Education was clearly a factor in how respondents agree with commissioning women and deaconesses. While the average for all respondents agreeing was 35 percent, 43 percent disagree, and 22 percent neutral, by education it looks different: grammar school, 15% agree; high school, 30%; college, 65%.

That the watershed issue on women's role in the church was ordination came as no surprise to any one on the Task Force. On this issue the least ambiguity was expressed. While the neutral category was chosen by 22 percent in regards to commissioning women as deaconesses, and by 24 percent in regards to women serving on the Mission Board, only 13 percent were neutral about ordination. The response to ordination of women was: Agree, 12%; Neutral, 13%; Disagree, 75%.

In a scientific survey of the whole Mennonite Church done in 1975 (*Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, by Kauffman and Harder) the percentage of agreement, 12, was exactly the same.

The only significant break in opposition to ordaining women is found among the college educated from ages 15 to 50.

A significant variable in the response to this matter was what the respondents understand the New Testament to teach.

Those respondents who believe in literal "headship" of man are 31 percent more likely to disagree with ordaining women.

The purpose of the survey was to gather data and promote discussion of all the issues. Ordination was just one question among many others which concerned women in the family and men in the family.

To the issue of mothers of preschool age children being employed more than one-quarter time, the respondents said: Agree, 7%; Disagree, 81%.

To the issue of mothers of school-age children being employed more than one-quarter time, the respondents said: Agree, 23%; Disagree, 41%.

Who should take primary responsibility in the home for leading family devotions? The respondents said: Man, 43%; Share, 48%; Either, 8%.

Only 60 percent who said the man should lead the family devotions said that in fact he always does.

Who should take primary responsibility for final decisions on major expenditures? The respondents said: Man, 25%; Share, 72%; Either, 3%.

Eighty-five percent of those who said the decision should be shared said that it is in fact always shared.

Seventy-six percent said that men and women should share primary responsibility for disciplining children. Of those who said that the man should be primarily responsible for disciplining children, only 35 percent said he in fact always is.

Thirty-seven percent of women are employed 11 to 20 hours. The reason most frequently given for employment was personal fulfillment. Financial necessity was second.

According to the survey's data women in Lancaster Conference are bearing fewer children than in the past. While 16 percent of women over 65 had seven children, only three percent aged 51 and 65 had that many. The length of time children are nursed is increasing.

The last question of the survey requested comments of any kind related to the questionnaire. The ones most frequently written were: "I believe women's gifts should be used in the church, but I do not believe in ordination." 123; "Submission of women to men is the most Christian way of ordering responsibility." 47; "Selection of all leaders should be based on qualification and calling by the Holy Spirit, not on sex." 40; "Women should not dominate over men." 37; "The Bible clearly teaches what women's place is and should be taught rather than asking people's opinion in a survey like this." 35; "Mutuality is the main theme in understanding relationships of women and men in the church." 33; "If men would be better leaders, women would not be looking for more leadership responsibility (let men be leaders)." 30; "It is wrong not to use the gifts of women, including ordination." 29.

A truck driver, a logger, homemakers, pastors and machinists all filled out questionnaires. No two were returned with identical responses. But all helped to begin the work of honest, tolerant and caring discussion, which was the primary purpose of the survey.

In September 1984 the work of the Task Force will be reviewed again. Its future is uncertain. But the wish of the Task Force and of the FLC is that the discussion started during the last year will continue in congregations, in committees and among individuals. Increased understanding, more theological study and greater sensitivity about ways women can be involved in the church's ministries are the hoped-for outcome.

The Family Life Commission, Salunga, Pa. 17538, is available to review the complete data with interested people.—*Lancaster Conference News*.

## Letters

Dear Ms. Steiner,

While I thoroughly enjoyed reading the 1st person stories in the May-June issue on Childbearing/Childlessness, I was very distressed by the lead article. In Dorothy Yoder Nyce's article, "Childbearing and the Bible," 34 column inches were devoted to Old Testament examples of the patriarchal commentary on childbearing, while less than 3 inches talked about "the radical changes that Jesus brought to understandings regarding childbirth."

I think it is time that we as Christian and feminist women make it clear exactly what we are accepting and what we are rejecting from our traditional religious teachings. If we truly believe in the wholeness and integrity of women, we must emphasize biblical support of this belief or never expect to be accepted as such in our churches.

For anyone interested in further exploring the interface between traditional Christianity and women, I suggest Andrea Dworkin's book *Right-Wing Women*.

Sincerely, Sharon Mishler, Salem, OR

Dear Sue,

I have been a reader of the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns *Report* for about three years and decided today was the time to let you know how much I appreciate your work as editor and the work of the many women in the Church who share their ideas and their life experiences in the *Report*.

As I read the issue of childbearing and childlessness, I was inspired and impressed by the variety, depth, and power of our collective and individual stories. I appreciate the honesty and lack of sentimentality in all the descriptions. We are beginning to cut through stereotypical drivel, cultural and familial expectations and other forms of lying. We are freely expressing our doubts, our envy and our hopes without self-pity or self-aggrandizement. We can then begin to choose new language about our relationships to children and about our relationships to ourselves.

Reading these articles, I felt proud of my womanhood and proud of the creative, powerful and exciting women who are my sisters in the Church and who point me to a God who mothers the universe. As I teach my course, "Womanhood in America," this fall at Goshen College, I hope that the young women and men in the class will begin to comprehend some of the voices previously hidden from them in women's history and literature but also catch the excitement of the new stories we are creating today. Whether our arena is the classroom, the written word, the land, our homes or any combination of the above, we can "mother" ourselves, each other and the generations which follow us.

In sisterhood, Shirley H. Showalter, Assistant Professor of English and History, Goshen College

Dear Editor Sue Steiner,

I've immensely enjoyed *Report* #55 May-June 1984. I've given much thought to the 10 answers on the impact of childbearing/childlessness on our lives. I do not find any of the women completely childless. Each one, whether giving birth or not, mentions involvement with children and the importance of it in her own life.

None of the ten represents those of us who had our first child by age 20, and through the years matured emotionally, and now are gladly helping with the care of our grandchildren, so their parents can also live full lives.

Also no one has spoken for the foster and adoptive mother. After two healthy sons and three miscarriages, we decided to *not* spend time and money on a specialist in hope of birthing more children. I also decided to *not* finish my college education. We chose to become foster parents and later adoptive parents. Today our four sons are in their twenties. Yes, they've all had an impact on my life. They've forced me to grow in every way in order to be the best possible parent. And each one is becoming the best possible adult.

I feel my sons and their families are part of the reason I'm involved in a peace group, a hunger concerns group, on an MCC board, responsible for SELFHELP Crafts in our local gift and thrift shop and also drive school bus.

Without children, I'd probably have been a good teacher these past 30 years, influencing many, but not close to any. Today I feel I have been and am an OK mother, influencing four boys as they became men. Watching them make adult choices and no longer feeling responsible for their actions is also a joy.

Shalom, Marilyn Yoder, Archbold, Ohio

---

## News and Verbs

At its June 22-23 meeting, the MCC Canada Peace & Social Concerns Committee appointed **Peggy Regehr**, Winnipeg, as the first staffperson for the CWC in Canada. Peggy's one-half time assignment begins in September, pending final approval by MCC Canada Executive Committee. A major focus of her activity will be to serve as an educational and informational resource on women's issues in Canada, networking with women on an inter-Mennonite basis in the various provinces.

**Emily Will**, Menomonie, WI, assumes the CWC staff position in Akron in August. The other half of her assignment will focus on military tax concerns. Emily served with MCC in Jamaica from 1978-1980 and has most recently been working as a journalist for the *Dunn County News*. Emily has a B.S. in Home Economics from Ohio State University and has done master's work in agricultural journalism at University of Madison. She replaces **Linda Schmidt**, who completes a 2-year term in July.

Haight-Ashbury Mennonite Fellowship, San Francisco, installed **Ruth Buxman** as pastor on May 6. Ruth accepted the 3 year half-time assignment after serving as interim pastor since December 1, 1983. In keeping with the tradition of the fellowship, leadership emerged from within the congregation, as had all previous leaders. Ruth originally came to San Francisco 2½ years ago as part of a Clinical Pastoral Education program through Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (Fresno) and began worshipping with the fellowship at that time. Her involvement increased and was formalized last summer as one of two interim pastors. After Lois Janzen, the previous pastor, resigned, Ruth accepted the call to serve as interim pastor until this summer. A long-term call to her as pastor was issued by the congregation in March following a leadership survey. Ruth grew up in Reedley, CA and attended Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church. She is a graduate of Fresno State with a B.S. in nursing and a graduate of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary with an M. Div. She served a two-year nursing assignment with MCC in Haiti.

Three women, all members of the First Mennonite Church of Oak Park, Oak Park, Illinois, were ordained to the ministry of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church on May 27, 1984. In a service titled "Celebrating God's Gifts," **Ann Showalter** of Oak Park, IL, **Norma Goertzen**, Chicago, IL and **Pauline Kennel**, Lombard, IL, were formally set apart for special ministries within the larger church.

Ann Showalter graduated from Bethany Theological Seminary in Oakbrook, Illinois in 1982 and has served as a chaplain two years. Beginning in the 1984-85 school year, Ann will commute to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries to serve as Assistant Director of Field Education. Ann's husband Ray works in nursing administration. Since 1979, Norma Goertzen has worked as head librarian at North Park Seminary, of the

Evangelical Covenant Church. Norma was ordained for her service in this capacity. Norma's husband Ardean is pastor of the First Mennonite Church of Oak Park and was worship leader of the ordination service. Pauline Kennel has been Director of CAM—Chicago Area Mennonites—since 1982. Her ordination confirms her in the ministry of coordinating the activities of and providing spiritual leadership for the twenty-one Mennonite churches in the Chicago area. Pauline's husband Leroy pastors a Mennonite church in Sterling, Illinois.

Correction: Marcia Good Maust grew up in Mexico where her parents served under the Franconia Mission Commission, not Eastern Mennonite Board as stated on page 10 of the March-April 1984 issue.

On May 7 the national legislative body for the United Methodist Church approved a report calling on the 9.4 million member church to begin referring to God and Jesus in sexually inclusive language in prayers, hymns and worship. The report exempts tampering with the Lord's Prayer and allows for traditional wording of hymns to be "retained as necessary" while developing any new inclusive language hymnal. The report carries the weight of a formal recommendation by the church's governing body, but at this point does not mandate compliance in local churches.—*Washington Post*, May 8, 1984.

**Thirty-nine women** from 12 countries met in Hanoi in January 1984 for a seminar on "Peace, Development and Happiness of Women and Children in Southeast Asia." The meeting was sponsored by the Vietnam Women's Union and the Democratic Federation of Women. In addition to examining the status of women in each country and making plans to implement the Program of Action of the United Nations Decade for Women, group members emphasized the need for peace, stability and cooperation in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.—*Asian Action*, May-June 1984.

*REPORT* is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Sue Clemmer Steiner, Apt. 3, 87 Westmount Rd. North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 5G5.

To subscribe or change your address, please send your old address with your new address to: MCC, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501. Allow 2-4 weeks for address change. Contributions welcome.

# MCC

Mennonite  
Central  
Committee



21 South 12th Street  
Akron  
Pennsylvania  
U.S.A.  
17501

**Address  
correction  
requested**

2nd Class  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Akron, PA 17501